



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

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### PROFILE OF THE RURAL POPULATION

#### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Growth in the rural population in Australia from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s resulted in a reversal of the long-term trend of a declining rural population (that is, all persons living in small towns or settlements with a population of less than 1,000). Although the growth was only modest (average of 1.9% per year), it saw the rural population grow to just over 2.5 million in 1991. This represented 15 per cent of the total population, a proportion which is low compared to most other countries. Since World War II, this number has been influenced by a number of factors, beginning with the implementation of soldier resettlement schemes following the War, natural population growth rate and a mid-1970s trend, which included commuters settling on the outer fringes of major cities and city people, particularly retirees, moving to coastal localities.

Three in four rural Australians live in New South Wales, Victoria or Queensland, due to these States' large regions amenable to agricultural development. In comparison to the urban population, rural people are highly represented in the Northern Territory (32%), Tasmania (27%), and Queensland (21%). The Northern Territory has experienced the greatest growth in rural population, increasing by 29 per cent between 1986 and 1991, while Queensland's rural community increased 14 per cent.

Historically, men have outnumbered women by substantial proportions in rural areas. However, since a ratio of 121 men for every 100 women recorded at the 1954 Census, the proportion has steadily declined to a ratio in 1991 of 109 men per 100 women. During this same period there were improvements in the standard of living in rural areas, changes in the role of women in the labour force and decreasing reliance on labour as a result of increased mechanisation.

On average, the male population in rural areas was slightly older than the male population in urban areas with a median age of 32 years compared to 31 for urban areas. The median age of rural women was 32 years, slightly younger than women in urban areas whose median age was 33 years. There were high proportions of children (aged 0 to 16) and 'middle aged' adults (aged 30 to 55), indicators of a relatively high proportion of 'traditional' families in rural areas. There were also marked differences in the number of younger adults in rural and urban areas. People in their late teens and early twenties (the ages typically associated with leaving school and entering the work force or tertiary education) were under represented in rural areas. This was more evident in the number of rural women, with the ratio of males being substantially higher in the age group 15 to 24 than for any other age group.

Married people represented 63 per cent of the rural adult population compared to 55 per cent of the urban adult population, while the percentage of divorced, separated and widowed people, especially women, was lower in rural areas.

There were 265,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people counted in the 1991 Census with 86,000 (32%) living in rural areas.

## EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

In 1991, 42 per cent of persons in rural areas, aged 15 and over, had left school before they were 16 (including those who did not go to school). This compares to only 36 per cent of persons, living in urban areas, in the same category. In rural areas, women (aged 15 and over) were more likely than men to have stayed at school until they were at least 17 years of age, while the reverse was true in urban areas. Overall, 4.7 per cent of persons in rural areas, 15 and over, were still at school compared to 4.9 per cent of people, 15 and over, in urban areas.

Tertiary students who lived in rural areas accounted for only 11 per cent of students at TAFE colleges and seven per cent of students undertaking courses at colleges of advanced education or universities. This is a reflection of the small number of tertiary institutions, particularly universities in or readily accessible from rural areas. The proportion of men in rural areas with post-school qualifications (27%) was less than that of men in urban areas (32%). In comparison, there was little difference between women in rural and urban areas with similar proportions having post-school qualifications.

In 1991, there were 1.2 million people in the labour force in rural areas, representing 15 per cent of Australia's total labour force. The Agriculture forestry, fishing and hunting industry employed 24 per cent of employed persons in the rural area, while Community Services (predominantly health and education) employed 15 per cent and the Wholesale/Retail sector, 14 per cent. The labour force participation rate of men in rural areas was 75 per cent compared to 53 per cent for women. Between 1981 and 1991, the rural labour force participation rate fell by five percentage points for men and increased three percentage points for women. While urban men's labour force participation rate fell by five percentage points, urban women's participation rate increased by nearly six percentage points.

The median annual income range of persons aged 15 years or more in rural and urban areas was the same at \$12,001-\$16,000. However, the median annual income of rural families (\$25,001-\$30,000) was lower than that of urban families (\$35,001-\$40,000). Overall, employed people in rural areas were more likely to have been working in the private sector, to have been self-employed, to have worked longer hours and to have worked at home, than employed urban people.

The cost of housing was lower in rural areas with the median weekly rent being in the range of \$48-\$77 compared to the urban median range of \$108-\$137. The median monthly housing loan repayment for rural households was in the range \$476-\$550 compared to the urban median repayment range of \$551-\$625.

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